Pontius Pilate
Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26
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High up in the Swiss Alps, picturesque Lake Lucerne sits at the base of Mt. Pilatus. According to ancient, but unconfirmed legend, when the mists and fog extend from the water all the way up the mountain, the ghost of Pontius Pilate may be seen, washing his hands in the water of the lake, over and over, moaning, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

What we know about Pontius Pilate is a mixture of fact and legend, much more of the latter than the former. Early Christian writers attribute to him a variety of sinister characteristics, portraying him as cruel, unfeeling, insensitive, the arch enemy of God. On the other hand, the Eastern Church canonized Pilate's wife, calling her Procula. The Coptic Church honors both Pilate and his wife, as saints and martyrs. Early traditions have him committing suicide during the historically cruel reign of Caligula. Yet other traditions hold that Pilate became a Christian, that his body was carried to France and buried on a hill near Vienne which bears his name.

There is no way to recover fact from legend. Among it all, I come down on the side of the ghost of Lake Lucerne. For there, washing his hands, asking over and over, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?", is the characterization relevant for us.

How strange that the Apostles's Creed, the oldest, orderly Christian affirmation of faith, should recall him by name. Out of a great gallery: Joseph, his father, John the Baptist, Anna, Zechariah, Simeon, Elizabeth, Peter, Andrew, John, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Martha, Lazarus - the creed choses two, two portraits - two people to accompany the church's memory down through history: Mary his mother, and Pontius Pilate, under whose political jurisdiction he died. But even that is not as concise as we might wish. Pilate himself would protest the simplicity and clarity and finality of that liturgical cant - "suffered under Pontius, was crucified, dead and buried..." In fact. if we listen carefully to the ghost of Lake Lucerne, we might hear something.....

I was a politician. I was a politician in a system of government that dignified the word politics. The Roman Empire you talk about so condescendingly, so patronizingly, was a marvel. You don't know much about it. Your preachers, so glibly, use it for sermon illustrations, in full confidence that people won't know the first thing about Roman Justice, Roman Peace, Roman Law. Well, I was a Roman politician - and I participated in a system that made justice a reality for people living on the very edge of barbarism. We made peace: there were no great wars: there were no body counts mounting into the thousands. We kept the peace: enforced it when we had to. You're still trying to do that - and not very successfully, but we did and whereever we went, we brought order and justice and a system in which human life thrived. We civilized whereever we went. We built - courts and libraries and temples and roads and bridges and aqueducts andamphitheatres. We loved music and poetry and architecture and sport.

I was a Governor in the Roman Imperial system with a title of Proconsul. The Emperor was Tiberius Caesar. My assignment was the provinces of Judea, Samaria and Idumea. My subjects were a strange, volatile mixture of people

who had been fighting along the Eastern rim of our sea for centuries as far as any body knew. Arabic people, merchants, traders from further east, wandering desert people, and the Semites - the Samaritans and the Jews.

The Jewish people and their cousins, the Samaritans, were always difficult to govern. Their religion itself seemed to us to be the source of arrogance and contrariness. They didn't appreciate our culture. They had their own notions of justice. And they had a particular averion to our art. We Romans have one of the best records in history for respecting the rights of conquered people. We didn't insist that Jews stop being Jews in order to satisfy some theological exclusiveness on our part. Their religion was their own business. But that wasn't good enough. They insisted, my advisors told me, that their God was the only God. They refused even to acknowledge our gods and, you know, the more you think about that, the more it begins to look like political resistance, subversion even. And then - all those laws - you can't eat this and that, you can't cook on Friday evening, you can't draw water from a well all day Saturday, and the holidays and secret ceremonies. I'm no barbarian, mind you. I know that you can't force people to believe or not to believe anything. But the Jews made it terribly difficult for us to govern.

You forget, don't you, that my territory was remote and essentially unimportant militarily. The attention of the Emperor and his advisors was certainly never on us. And you forget that to be a governor in a remote province, was to be on one's own. It took weeks to get a message to Rome and an answer back. Asking an "Advisory Group on Jewish Affairs" back in Rome how best to deal with a particular crisis was out of the question. I was in charge. I was Roman authority in Judea. What happened or didn't happen, everyone knew, was my responsibility.

I served for ten years in Judea. About the time I was in line for a promotion, my career came to an end. Three incidents were responsible, I suppose. Funny you should know about me because of the Nazarene incident. It wasn't even one of the three.

In any event, I used my power to establish Roman authority in Jerusalem early in my term. I still think I was correct. I thought it was important to demonstrate our strength. And so I scheduled a parade - all available legions were summoned to the capital of the Jews for a march-through. It was - and still is - an accepted military, political strategy for communicating the perimeters of power to all occupied people. Perhaps it was the revolutionaries who started it. We never did discover the agitators, but before you knew it, someone in the crowd started shouting and throwing rocks, a group grabbed the standard with the Roman Eagle on top and broke it in two, a few of our horses bolted, and several young legionnaires had their swords out before their commanding officers knew it. Blood was shed: we demonstrated our ability to rule. But word of the incident did get to Rome.

On another occasion, I expropriated some money from their very ample temple treasury in order to complete an aqueduct we were building for them. The money was for something they needed: drought was permanent and serious. I assumed their cooperation, I thought they would be pleased to help, contribute voluntarily perhaps.

I really didn't understand that my expropriation of funds would be regarded as a religious offense, as blasphemy. Rome, too, thought I should have known better.

The third incident caused my recall. Some fanatical Samaritans, inspired by their version of Jewish religion thought they were about to discover valuable ancient artifacts at their sacred mountain. More and more people got involved and gathered to watch. They wouldn't disperse and we learned long ago that unruly crowds of occupied people have a way of becoming politicized mobs rather quickly. So I did what I thought I had to do. I ordered our legions to disperse the crowd and to execute the trouble makers. By the time the account arrived in Rome, my decision appeared very foolish. The Emperor recalled me from my post and I fade from your view.

So I haunt you. You know my name better than any Emperor save Julius Caesar. For nearly 2,000 years you have remembered me better than any of your own saints, save a small handful. There's irony in it, I suppose. But then you haunt me as well, and yes, I do recall the incident, the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

My job, at religious holidays - and Passover was the biggest of all, was - very simply - to keep the peace. "Law and order" I believe you call it and under its guise you have made some ghastly mistakes of your own if I remember coorectly - Chicago - Selma - Kent State. You know then, don't you, the difficulty of my position. I had to see that the Jewish puppet monarchs had their egos massaged, and that those pompous fools at the Temple had opportunity to play silly games, and that the crowds didn't get out of control, and that the water didn't dry up and that there was enough food. And so you will understand it if I didn't appear attentive when the priests came insisting that I do something about one God-forsaken, rag-tag carpenter from Nazareth. God knows, you remember my story. I just wish you wouldn't be so pompous about it..."Suffered under Pontius Pilate"...Why can't you acknowledge that the art of politics is the art of compromise, expedience, and that every President, Governor, and Mayor who ever lived knows what that means. Every General who commits troops knows that some will be killed.

You know what I did. It's all there for you to read. I did not find fault with the man. I tried every maneuver at my disposal to set him free. I stalled, I sent him to that fool, Herod, I had him whipped thinking the crowd might come to its senseswhen he appeared bloody and beaten. I even tried to bargain with the life of a ruthless, murdering scoundrel named Barabas. If I had not approved the execution of Jesus - I would have had a riot on my hands. Worse yet, when the news arrived in Rome, that I had interrogated someone who claimed to be King - and allowed him to go free, my career would have been over.

My wife knew my agony. Procula saw exactly what was happening. She warned me. So I washed my hands of the whole affair and did what had to be done. Or rather, I tried to wash my hands. That, you see, is the only ultimate mistake I made. History remembers me not for some great evil I did, but for something I allowed to transpire: something that happened because I washed my hands.

"Suffered under Pontius Pilate..." May I remind you that my name in your creed is blunt testimony that your Jesus lived in history. You are inclined to forget that, you'll pardon me for observing. You enshrine him in stained glass, and syrupy hymns written 1900 years after the fact, and moral platitudes... You've got him on the walls of your churches looking for all the world like a character out of an English novel and you forget that he was in history. My name is there

to remind you. He was a semite; a Jew, dark, swarthy, spoke Aramaic. He had a family and friends, a body, an appetite, emotions and intellect. We Romans cast our deities in bronze and decorated the street corners with them. Yours walked around on earth, in the streets, and was unrecognizable as deity. Yours lived and taught you how to live... and died teaching you how to die.

And let me remind you, in case you still need reminding, about the complexity of politics. Let me remind you that I was not - by anybody's estimation - a bad man. I did the best I could. I certainly didn't make a habit of executing innocent carpenters from the countryside. I intended no harm that day so long ago. But the city was crowded, and the revolutionaries - the Zealots - were all there, always waiting, like buzzards, watching for the right moment to start a fight they hoped would result in a revolution. That's what I saw when I walked out on the portico, with Jesus - bound and bleeding, standing behind me: a hostile mob, furious at Rome, at me, at the hand fate had dealt them. They didn't care about Jesus. He wasn't the issue. I had to do something - and so I compromised..."trade - off". I believe you call it now: the life of one insignificant carpenter - for a little public peace and tranquility. That's what politics is all about: Hiroshima, Nagasaki - in exchange for nuclear weapons instead of food, medicine; swords instead of plow shares. You should know by now the complexity of politics and the necessity of compromising morality. And if you don't: if it doesn't torture you, then please have the decency to take my name out of your creed.

I tried to wash my hands. It didn't work, of course. And that's the lesson you should learn from me. It is impossible to be neutral about Jesus who is called the Christ. My neutrality cost him him life.

There was something about him, which made neutrality very difficult - for everybody. Certainly he pushed his friends to the limits and beyond. He made it almost impossible for his own people to remain neutral. In fact, it seemed to me that he went out of his way to precipitate a crisis: to force the issue with people who would rather not have taken a stand. Let me remind you that the day he really became a problem for me was the day he went to great pains to play out a role his own people had assigned to the Messiah. When those old men at the temple, praying and chanting and swaying back and forth with their prayer shawls on started to think about their Savior - what they thought about was an obscure description in their Scripture about a King coming on an ass, humble - but victorious. He didn't have to hire that donkey to enter the city. He could have walked in like every other pilgrim. But in riding in he forced the issue, don't you see. People had to decide what they thought of him. People had to decide. Some stripped the clothes off their backs to make a royal carpet for him. Others turned into that angry, surly mob which showed up outside my palace five days later. Neutrality was out of the question.

We're not really so different - you and I. It's natural to want to avoid making commitments, taking stands, particularly when they might be unpopular, costly.

But let me remind you of something you should already know and that is that on the really important matters it isn't possible to be neutral. One of your own theologians - Catholic - wrote: "We are free. But we are not free to be free. In the long run it is impossible to be undecided about reality. Not to chose is itself a choice." (Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, p. 438.)

You see - the towering tragedy of my life: the towering irony of Pontius Pilate - is that in trying to be neutral, I presided over his crucifixion.

I had an opportunity to do something utterly good and strong and right. I had a God-given chance to be fully human: to be myself in a way that God intended me to be. I was face to face with the Savior of the human race - and I flinched: I caved in: in what I now regard as the weakest, most pathetic gesture of my life - I chose expediency, I publicly washed my hands of the whole affair.

I had my chance and missed it. I could have loved and followed; instead you remember me as a crucifier.

What of you? That's the question which remains now.

What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

The historical information about Pilate was discovered in:

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 3, pp. 811-813.

A Gallery of New Testament Rogues, From Herod to Satan, John R. Bodo, Westminster Press 1979, pp. 58-65.